

NOSTALGIA

How brave George survived to tell tale of being torpedoed by Germans

Postman and decorated naval reservist was one of the lucky ones as submarine attack on three cruisers in the North Sea killed hundreds

Feature

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A century ago, German submarines torpedoed three Royal Navy cruisers, sending hundreds of men to their death in the cold North Sea.

Wakefield postman George Willie Woodhead was one of the lucky ones to survive the sinking of HMS Cressy just weeks after the start of the First World War.

His encounter of the event was published in the Wakefield Express 100 years ago today.

The naval reservist, of Portobello Road, gave a graphic account of his experience on board the cruiser when it went down with HMS Aboukir and HMS Hogue on September 22, 1914. A total of 1,459 men were killed in the North Sea off the Dutch coast.

The article – entitled A Wakefield Postman's Thrilling Experience, a graphic account of the North Sea mishap – told how George, then a married dad of three, believed the cruisers were attacked by six German submarines.

He also recounted how he



George Woodhead in his naval uniform.

and his shipmates raised each other's spirits by singing.

George, who was 36 at the time of the attack, returned from the war and went on to be awarded the Campaign Medal for World War I 1914–15 Star, the British War Medal 1914–18. He also held the Queen's South Africa Cape Medal 1899–1902 for his earlier service during the Boer War. He died aged 59 in September 1937.

His grandson Roger Holmes, of Walton Lane, Sandal, attended a 100th anniversary event for the three cruisers at the Historic Dockyard in Chatham last month.

A commemorative plaque

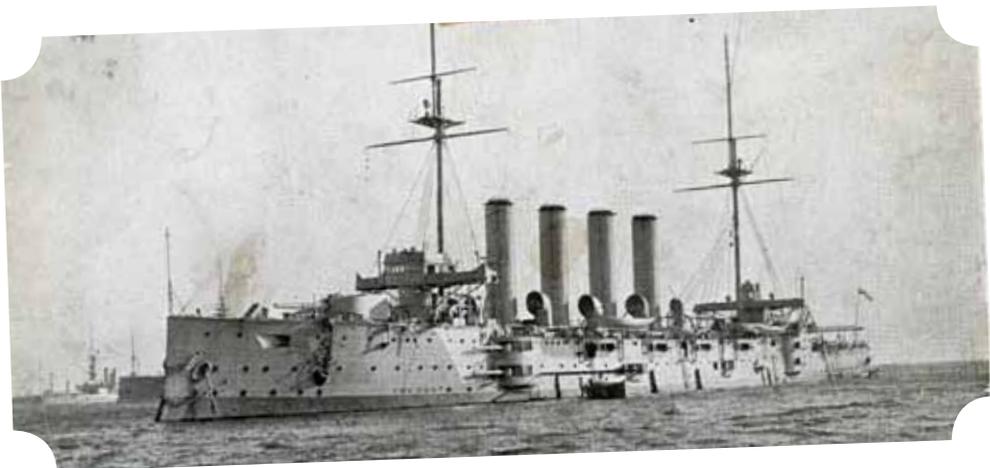
was unveiled and there was an act of remembrance, where the Last Post was played by a Royal Marine bugler while 1,459 poppy petals fell.

Mr Holmes said: "The role of the army in the war is well documented but the Royal Navy played a big part too. It was nice for that to be recognised as part of the commemoration events and the service was really poignant.

"This was the only occasion in naval history when a submarine sank three enemy cruisers in a single hour. And 1,459 men died. It is a significant part of the war's history."



A copy of an illustration from the Book 'Submarine Warfare' showing Captain Johnson forlornly atop the capsized hull of his cruiser HMS Cressy.



HMS Cressy, as pictured in a postcard George sent home to his wife before the ship's sinking.

Extract from the Wakefield Express article published on Saturday, October 3, 1914

WAKEFIELD AT WAR

ON THE ILL FATED CRESSY

A WAKEFIELD POSTMAN'S THRILLING EXPERIENCES – A GRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF THE NORTH SEA MISHAP

"Those who were lost crossed the River Jordan with smiling faces and a cheer on their lips. They died the true death of British tars. As the ship went down the guns were still firing, and one chap, smoking a cigarette at his post said, 'I will have one last draw and so doing went down with his ship - a brave fellow.'"

In picturesque language such as this a Wakefield hero of the recent North sea disaster - Seaman Woodhead, of H.M.S. Cressy - told to a 'Yorkshire Evening News' representative probably the most vivid and complete account of all that happened to the Aboukir, the Hogue, and the Cressy.

IN THE DANGER ZONE

"Our ship, along with the Aboukir

and the Hogue, were on patrol duty at the time. We knew we were in the danger zone from information we had received, but our protection from submarines is a torpedo boat flotilla, and for a certain reason it was absent at the time.

I was on the deck about half-past six in the morning when I heard a fellow shout 'look at the Aboukir.' I looked and saw she had a list on the port side as if she had been mined. The bridge is the proper place to direct one's gaze in such circumstances to find out whether there is trouble and, looking there, I saw something really serious had really occurred. Then the word was passed round: 'We are surrounded by submarines!' How we wished the torpedo flotilla had now been here, for we could not defend ourselves.

MEN CLASPING EACH OTHER'S HANDS

Looking again to the Aboukir I saw

as the ship was sinking all the men standing round the rails on deck, clasping each other's hands, and so passed the Aboukir. We were close to her and stood stationary to rescue her men. Then the Hogue got two or three torpedoes right through her, and she went down in, as near as I can tell, about ten minutes. Then I heard that a submarine was going round our bow. As it got round it fired. For some reason a man was shot out of the conning tower of the German submarine mentioned. I actually saw this there is no doubt about it. He had a lifebuoy on. With regard to this incident it is suggested that in order to provide more air for the submarine to enable her to discharge more torpedoes the Germans sacrificed a member of their crew.

DISGUISED TRAWLER

Ahead was a trawler flying the Dutch flag, but as soon as it saw

our ship – the last of three – going down it pulled down the Dutch flag and hoisted the German colours. But we were not done for yet. Some of our men were up rigging cheering as they went, but others were blazing away at the port guns. As the German flag went up we fired at the trawler, and when she was hit she... burst into flames. This led us to think that she had petrol aboard, which she was supplying to the submarines.

SANK TWO SUBMARINES?

We immediately sighted another submarine making for us, and we fired at her. At this time the Aboukir was upside down. Well our ship managed to account for two submarines of that I am sure – and had the satisfaction of having turned the trawler in a blaze. The torpedo struck us between the stoke-hole and the engine room and there was an explosion. Many

must have been killed by the torpedoes, both those in the water and on the ships. I should say there were about half-a dozen submarines, which we had been informed were sighted off the Dutch coast a little time before.

CRESSY'S CAPTAIN'S ORDERS

As the ship was sinking the captain gave the order: 'Well lads, look after yourselves. Get anything you can, and get overboard.' I dived off the quarter-deck and was in the water for three hours surrounded by men who remarked, 'It's a long way to Tipperary now' sang songs, and said to a despairing comrade. 'Buck up, chum.' Captain Johnson I saw go down with his ship, standing on the propeller as she sank. He was a typical, well-loved English gentleman and a good naval officer to boot. At this period Woodhead was visibly moved by his recollection.

HOW HE WAS SAVED

Woodhead then went on to say: - I managed to get hold of a piece of timber, and though not a good swimmer managed to keep myself afloat until I drifted towards a cutter and was hauled in. From there I was transferred to the Flora and I firmly believe that had not the torpedo boat flotilla arrived at that moment the Flora would have come in for trouble.

GRATITUDE TO THE DUTCH

On our arriving in Holland we were taken about three hundred miles inland, and but a few miles from the German frontier. I wish to make known along with all my fellows the large heartedness of the Dutch people, and their liking for the English. I am on ten days leave and my desire, along with that of the whole of the men who were saved is to 'get our own back and a big bit more.'